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Review of *Unruly River: Two Centuries of Change Along the Missouri* by Robert Kelley Schneiders

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Unruly River: Two Centuries of Change Along the Missouri. Robert Kelley Schneiders. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999. xi+314 pp. Photographs, figures, maps, notes, references, index. \$35.00 cloth (ISBN 0-7006-0937-7).

With renewed discomfort, I return to my September 1997 issue of *National Geographic*, reading of China's grandiose Three Gorges Project. Construction of this immense concrete dam across the Yangtze River is well underway. When complete in 2009, the dam and reservoir will displace two million people and inundate four hundred miles of beautiful river and riparian lands. I want to lease a cargo plane, fly to China, and dump thousands of copies of Robert Kelley Schneiders's *Unruly River* on the cloistered leadership in Beijing, yelling at the top of my lungs, "Don't you see?"

Unruly River: Two Centuries of Change Along the Missouri should be required reading for anyone in the world who considers large dams the solution for some perceived social problem. Schneiders chronicles Euro-American contact with the Missouri since 1800, including the Corps of Engineers' prolonged struggle to tame the wild Missouri—even when it has been difficult to identify who the victim and the perpetrator of harm along the river has been.

The book begins by describing the contemporary river, from its headwaters in Montana to its confluence with the Mississippi upstream of St. Louis, accentuating the half-dozen mainstem dams in the upper basin and the dikes, narrowed and deepened channels, and other navigation features in the lower basin. Schneiders then recounts the flora and fauna of the predevelopment Missouri, accompanied by a series of black-and-white reproductions of early river paintings including those of Swiss artist Karl Bodmer who made his way up the Missouri in 1833. The reader yearning for color reproductions of these paintings will easily find them in *Karl Bodmer's America*, issued by the Smithsonian Institute in 1985. Even these diminished illustrations, along with Schneiders's understated style, convince the reader that the predevelopment river was an intensely beautiful and vibrant place.

From the apex of its native condition, first seen by Euro-Americans in the early 1800s, the Missouri's interaction with humans is all downhill. In the early years, human impact on the river was minimal. When Schneiders discusses keelboats, those wide, flat-bottomed vessels that were the first of commercial importance, one gets a taste of how difficult river life was for early explorers and settlers. He describes the cordell, a hemp rope a crew of

twenty to forty men, standing on the bank, would use to pull the keelboat upstream. While pulling, the men moved through the riverbank's almost impenetrable vines and brush, stepped into concealed holes, tumbled down stream banks, disentangled the rope from tree branches, forded small streams and rivers, fell into the Missouri as the riverbank caved in under their feet, thrashed through inordinately high elephant grass, tried to keep blowing sand out of their eyes, nose, and ears, and, worst of all, fought off incessant attacks from the hordes of mosquitoes that descended on their ravaged bodies, all the while sweating profusely under the summer sun. A cordeller, Schneiders quietly observes, "had a tough job."

Steamboats soon replaced keelboats on the Missouri, and commercial firms from St. Louis envisioned steamboat navigation to the Great Falls of the Missouri near the mining camps of Montana. These speedier vessels were more vulnerable to snags, the roots and branches of countless trees that fell into the water as the meandering river undercut one bank and then another. The Army Corps of Engineers was soon enlisted to remove these hazards—a goal the Corps has pursued relentlessly in the face of an uncooperative river and, ironically, decreasing interest in navigation. Railroads came to the Missouri River Valley in a big way starting in 1859; within a decade they had totally replaced commerce on the river, though Kansas City and Omaha still believed that navigation was the key to their future. Through countless regional conferences and the tireless efforts of local citizens, these river boosters convinced the Corps and Congress of the need for navigation improvements to renew river commerce.

Congressional vicissitudes and intervening World Wars delayed the Corps from completing these improvements for almost a hundred years. When the agency was finished, the river had been totally transformed. What started with wood dikes and willow mats, called revetments, ended with a nine-foot by three-hundred-foot navigation canal from Sioux City, Iowa, to the river's mouth, as well as five of the world's largest earthen impoundments in Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Unfortunately, commercial navigation on the Missouri was an idea that was obsolete in 1880; none of the river improvements since have changed that economic reality.

Schneiders suggests that two forms of human self-interest fueled this build-up of the Missouri: greed (the prospect of enhanced trade and property values) and the desire for good works (a belief that the river could be used "to improve the lot of the human race"). Rather than entirely blaming the Corps of Engineers, Schneiders carefully dissects the social milieu of the time and finds local citizens who used effective grassroots organizing

and hitched their star to the tenets of the progressive conservation movement (such as comprehensive river basin development); narrow agency goals; and the lofty visions of Gifford Pinchot, Theodore Roosevelt (who sought development of “inland waterways”), and Herbert Hoover (who craved a “cross of commerce” along the Missouri-Mississippi-Ohio river systems).

What Schneiders does so well is documenting how good intentions can go astray and, in their most exaggerated form, become hubris. His final chapter, which spells out the changes to nature along the river, is a powerful indictment of the narrow and shortsighted perspective of the engineers and politicians who meddled so much with the Missouri. Schneiders lists in painful detail the costs of river development: loss of fish and habitat; the elimination of beaches and sandbars so important for birds; the almost total removal of timber and native grasses; the destruction of the plant succession process; the dewatering of oxbow lakes that served as breeding areas for many species; and on and on. He quotes an Iowa state official who notes that “It’s not a very good fishery. It’s just a canal. . . . The channel is for navigation. It’s not for fish. It’s not for ducks.”

Where Schneiders’s story is incomplete is in its discussion of the impact of Missouri River development on the Indian tribes of the region. Tribes on many of the twenty-six basin reservations were affected in some way by Missouri River development. Occasionally, they may have benefited by jobs or the construction of a tributary impoundment. In other cases, they lost valuable riparian land to large reservoirs. In the worst circumstances, whole Indian communities had to relocate as their homes, schools, and community buildings were swamped. The most damning example affected the Indians of Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota, whose ancestors provided Lewis and Clark hospitality during the winter of 1802. Their forested bottomlands were taken for Oahe. Now their reservation is split into many parts by the reservoir, and the main community, New Town, sits forlorn on the wind-swept plain.

I have a dog-eared copy of *Harnessing the Big Muddy: The Story of the Missouri River Basin*, prepared by the US Indian Service in 1948 for Indian schoolchildren whose families and reservations would be affected by river basin development. While remarkably candid about the changes Indian children could expect, the book reminded them that since their “heritage is grandly Indian and heroically white,” they should capitalize upon the “new and greater opportunities” unfolding in the Missouri basin. The children would have no reprieve from this fate. Just as Indians must “change to ‘the

white man's road,'" they must also give up their lands and way of life to Missouri River development.

Schneiders could have done more to tell the upper basin story: how the reclamation portion of Missouri River development was to bring millions of acres of irrigated agriculture to the Northern Plains. In retrospect, the region was fortunate this development did not occur since farming has become financially difficult. The mainstem reservoirs have taken so much upper basin land, however, that the residents' resentment over the abandonment of the irrigation component of Missouri River development is understandable.

While *Unruly River* documents local citizens' roles in Missouri River development, these people are not as real and vibrant as the leading characters in John M. Barry's *The Rising Tide* (1997), the story of the great flood on the Mississippi River. *Unruly River* should be read with John R. Ferrell's two books on the Missouri—*The Big Dam Era* (1993), the story of dam construction, and *Soundings* (1995), the story of lower river navigation—as well as with Michael L. Lawson's *Dammed Indians: The Pick-Sloan Plan and the Missouri River Sioux, 1944-1980* (1982). The reader should also compare *Unruly River* with Karen L. Smith's *The Magnificent Experiment* (1986), a similar story chronicling the relationship between the Bureau of Reclamation (the Corps' sister water development agency) and the residents of central Arizona as they pioneered reclamation projects at the turn of the century that make the Phoenix of today possible. Finally, the reader would do well to pick up Ivan Doig's *Bucking the Sun* (1997), a volume that offers a fictional story of love, endurance, and murder against the backdrop of the construction of Fort Peck Dam in the 1930s.

Schneiders has produced the most complete history of human development of the Missouri to date. He has painstakingly documented environmental changes to the river and provided a lasting journal of human activity along its sinuous path. **John E. Thorson**, *Special Master, Arizona Supreme Court, Phoenix*.